



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

CHRISTIAN MORALITY



Moses with the Tablets, 1659, Rembrandt



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Pray Psalm 121 together:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and
going
both now and forevermore. (NIV)

Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that is best suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the Breaking Open the Word worksheet for this week.

Catholic Faith, Life & Creed Version 2.0

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in
the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

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Editors: Bill Huebsch, Diana
Macalintal, & Nick Wagner

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Sharing Human Experience

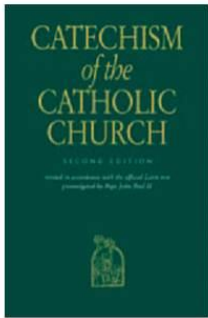
Overview of this session

Catechist begins this session with these or similar words:

- ▶ Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach us about morality, the ethical way to live in covenant relationship with God.
- ▶ The Book of Exodus contains the code of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.
- ▶ Inherent in the code is the perspective that actions speak louder than words.
- ▶ It was not enough to be a voice for the lowly and oppressed; there was an expectation of action and response.
- ▶ One's behavior must accompany one's words. Jesus signaled a shift in what had been a common understanding of moral teaching.
- ▶ Jesus insisted that love of God and love of neighbor is the heart of the law and the essence of morality.
- ▶ He placed love of God and love of neighbor on an equal par.
- ▶ When it comes to actions, the Church gives us clear directives.
- ▶ Put simply, the Church teaches that disciples must live a moral life. This session will explore what the Catholic Church teaches about Christian morality.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question.

- ▶ If you were asked what it meant to you to live a moral life, how would you respond?
- ▶ How would you finish this statement: According to your understanding of the word, morality is...
- ▶ If someone were to charge you with living a moral life, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What is that evidence?



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles 1749-1761.

Catechist continues:

Roots in Scripture

- ▶ Morality refers to behaviors that flow from an individual's principled assumptions.
- ▶ Both the Old Testament and the New Testament understood every part of life, both the secular and the spiritual, as one complete whole.
- ▶ Philosophy of the ancient Greek world, on the other hand, divided the spiritual and secular into separate parts. That division is called dualism.
- ▶ The Scriptures do not support dualism.
- ▶ Scripture affirms that all life is sacred and consecrated to God's saving presence.
- ▶ Life is not divided into things spiritual and things worldly.
- ▶ We often get caught in that trap. We think God doesn't care about our flat tire, or our inability to pay the rent this month or the work we do at our everyday jobs. That is false. God is a part of our whole, undivided lives. God wishes us to be happy and to be whole, not divided.
- ▶ The Old Testament understanding of wholeness is the right ordering of relationships, relationship to God, to one another, to the earth, and to oneself.
- ▶ The roots of Catholic morality are based primarily on the fundamental biblical themes of creation, exodus, covenant, and cross.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions. Do not spend too much time on these questions; perhaps give two or three moments to respond to each in dyads or provide a quiet moment for personal reflection and then move on.

Creation

The biblical theme of creation reminds us that God constantly seeks to recreate us in his image; he is always inviting new life; he always asks that we be good stewards of what he has given us—that we take care of one another, the poor, and the earth.

- ▶ How do you know you have been created in God's image?
- ▶ What does that mean to you?

Exodus

The biblical theme of exodus reminds us that God constantly invites us to turn away from all that enslaves us—all that keeps us in bondage (such as addictions of all forms)—and to allow God to lead us to freedom and new life.

- From what addictive behaviors in life does God want to free you?

Covenant

The biblical theme of covenant reminds us that we are in a covenant relationship with God. God entered into a binding relationship with human beings. He promised that he would take care of us and in response to his providential care; we would love the Lord God, one another, and those who could not take care of themselves.

- If someone were to ask you if you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, how would you answer them? How would you convince them? How do you feel about your responsibility to care for those who cannot care for themselves? In what way do you live up to this covenant, and in what way do you fall short?

Cross

The biblical theme of the cross reminds us that, like Jesus, we are invited to take up our cross and lay down our lives for others—for those who suffer.

- When was the last time you took up a cross for another person? What does that mean to you?

The Beatitudes

Just actions rooted in the Beatitudes

- The Christian Scriptures speak of moral behavior in terms of just actions such as feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty.
- Jesus affirmed the importance of the Ten Commandments, but he took them a step further.
- Jesus insisted that living the moral life requires a “radical detachment from material goods” (USCCA, 308). He insisted that such detachment leads to sharing such goods with poor and oppressed people. Jesus’ prescription for living the moral life can be found in the Beatitudes.



The Beatitudes. Artist unknown.
Russian icon before the 18th Century.
Public domain.

- ▶ The word Beatitude means blessedness, a state of happiness and joy. If one is to attain perfect peace and happiness, one must live the Beatitudes.
- ▶ The Beatitudes help us understand the spirit of the Ten Commandments as not some legalistic enumeration of “thou shalts” but a prescription for happiness and holiness.
- ▶ One can do no less than live according to the Law of God in response to the great gift of salvation.

Catechist invites participants to read Beatitudes either from their Bibles, Matthew 5:1-12, or from a copy provided by the catechist.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.
 Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 for they will be satisfied.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
 Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
 Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.
 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.” NAB Mt. 5:1-12

- ▶ The Beatitudes are our blueprint for happiness,
- ▶ They are the guide by which we live the moral life.
- ▶ They are rooted in the love of God and love for one another.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions with one other person, then share insights with larger group.

- ▶ Consider the list of Beatitudes.
- ▶ Can you name a time that you lived according to one of these Beatitudes?
- ▶ Were you ever poor in spirit? Were you ever in solidarity with one poorer than yourself?
- ▶ Did you ever hunger for doing the right thing? Did you ever struggle to do the right thing when the wrong thing would have been so much easier?
- ▶ Did you ever show mercy to someone else?
- ▶ Were you ever a peacemaker in any situation?
- ▶ Have you ever been persecuted for doing the right thing?

Catholic Approach to Morality Versus Other Approaches

- ▶ The Catholic approach to morality is very different from the more fundamentalist approach.
- ▶ Fundamentalism understands morality to be founded on literal biblical revelation.
- ▶ Catholic theology understands the Bible differently. Catholicism understands the Bible as the inspired word of God, but not as the literal word of God. God did not sit down and whisper verbatim into the evangelist's ear and tell them to write accordingly.
- ▶ The Bible is a culturally conditioned word, written from the perspective of the culture of the day. It is also comprised of literary genres that were in common use at the time it was written. Some of those genres used the vehicle of story and metaphor to emphasize some aspect of God's relationship to human beings. This is why the Church is needed to interpret the Scriptures in each age and generation.
- ▶ By saying Scripture is not the literal word of God does not mean that what is in Scripture is not true. The discernment of the Church is needed to discern what stories in Scripture were literary tools to drive home some point about who God is or how God acts and what stories in Scripture were factual events recorded for all time.
- ▶ For example, the death and resurrection of Jesus is a historical event. There are multiple testimonies not only in scriptural sources but also secular sources to attest to the Jesus event. The story of Jonah being swallowed in the belly of the large fish, on the other hand, is a literary tale told to make a point about how God interacts with human beings. This is why we need Tradition (the Church) to interpret God's word for us for all generations. For further amplification see appendix #1.
- ▶ When it comes to morality, the Catholic Church is all encompassing. Morality touches every part of human life. Morality touches all the ways we respond to life's challenges and decisions.
- ▶ In a recent news piece, a famous televangelist stated what should be the moral code for all Christian believers. What he listed was so narrowly defined that one life issue, abortion, and several sexual issues were all that he named.
- ▶ The Catholic Church, on the other hand, understands morality in a much broader sense. Indeed, abortion is a major life issue today, no doubt the greatest life issue of our time. But the Church teaches that all life is sacred, from the womb to the tomb.
- ▶ Thus, it is just as important to be attentive to issues that protect the unborn as well as issues that deal with the less advantaged, to be in solidarity with all who suffer and are oppressed, not just in our own backyard, but around the world.
- ▶ Catholic morality encompasses far more than abortion and sexual issues. It encompasses the entire way we live our lives and respond to God's world. It is for this reason that our Church is a voice for the issues surrounding illegal immigrants, war, health care, the horrors in Darfur, and all issues that threaten the dignity of persons in our midst and around the world.
- ▶ Very early in our Church history, one's morality was judged in light of their

discipleship. For example, before one was admitted for baptism, their readiness was discerned. (Catechumens preparing for baptism will discern their readiness before they are fully initiated.)

- ▶ The criteria for this discernment were based on the extent of the person's moral behavior. Was conversion visible in the person's life? Was there a change, a turn from one way of living to a new way of living in Christ? For example, was there evidence in the person's life that such conversion had taken place? Did this person reach out to the poor and disadvantaged? Did this person have a willingness and an enthusiasm for sharing the good news of Jesus? Did this person living according to gospel values? Did this person pray and nurture his or her relationship with God? These are questions that we must ask ourselves throughout our lives.

Catechist invites participants to summarize what they have heard to this point. Catechist then invites participants to respond to the following questions in dyads, then share insights in the wider group.

- ▶ The questions we ask catechumens are questions we must ask ourselves throughout our lives. How would you respond to the following questions?
- ▶ When you consider your moral life this past year, have you at any time made a conscious decision to turn away from a certain way of behaving and turned instead closer toward Christ?
- ▶ Have you reached out to the poor, oppressed and marginalized?
- ▶ Have you shared the gospel of Christ in your own world?
- ▶ Have you nurtured and grown in your relationship with Christ?



Stop here if you are dividing this session into two segments. If you are ending this session at this point, move to the closing prayer. If you are not ending the session at this point, simply continue to the end.

Part 2

When you begin the second segment at your next gathering, begin with the opening prayer from the previous week and invite participants to name some of the insights they explored in week one. Proceed to the overview and present the context once again. Then proceed to this point and begin again.

Other Foundations: Communal Nature of Morality

- ▶ The foundation of Christian morality is also based on the understanding given to us by St. Thomas Aquinas that nature and supernature are graced by God.
- ▶ Human beings possess dignity. God is present to us in all of life, thus all of life is graced by God.
- ▶ We have been told in the story of creation in the Book of Genesis that we are made in God's image.
- ▶ We are sacred because we are; not because of anything we have done.
- ▶ Jesus lives within us and teaches us what it means to be fully human. He is our happiness, our peace, and our joy.
- ▶ There is no room for an individualistic faith. We are members of a community of God's love.
 - We are in community through our union with God, who himself is communal by nature. God is Father, God is Son, and God is Spirit. We are social beings.
 - We are intended to live in relationship.
 - As human beings, we live in the community of family, Church, and world. We are destined for happiness insofar as we live in right relationship with one another.
 - When we respond in love to uphold the dignity of the human person, we become fully human and fully alive.

The moral life is communal

- ▶ Our moral life is communal.
- ▶ Even our personal sins impact others in some way. (Refer to Appendix for a related story.)
- ▶ Our pursuit of happiness must be grounded in care and concern for others.
- ▶ Living a moral life demands that we uphold the ethical teaching of Christ in the gospel.
- ▶ God created us with a free will. We have the power to choose the path for our lives. We are free to pattern our lives in conformity to God's will, to say yes or no to God. Human beings are free to choose between good and evil, thus we are called to responsibility.
- ▶ As mature persons of faith we are called to behave in a moral way because God desires it. However, we are given the freedom to act morally or not.

Sin can weaken our capacity to act morally

- ▶ We can grow in freedom by performing moral actions, by developing good habits.

- ▶ Sin dulls our ability to act morally. Thus, living a life of virtue is important if one wants to live a moral life.
- ▶ Such virtuous living strengthens our ability to live morally.

Catechist presents the example found in Appendix #2 or presents an example from his or her own life. Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

- ▶ What does it mean when we say that sin can weaken your capacity to live a moral life and living a moral life of virtue can increase our capacity to live morally?

Moral acts

- ▶ In order to understand Catholic morality, we must understand the essence of what constitutes a moral act. Every moral action has three parts:
 - what we do—the act
 - the intention—why we do the act
 - the actual situation of the act such as where and when it takes place, how the act is carried out, with whom it is carried out, and the consequences of the act.
- ▶ An act is moral if the act is by itself a good thing to do, a good action.
- ▶ Some things are, by nature, intrinsically bad, and thus, the act itself is not a moral act (such as murder, rape, or torture). The reason for doing such acts makes no difference. The act in and of itself is always immoral.
- ▶ An action is morally good if the action itself is a good action and if the person doing the act has a good intention.
- ▶ If the person carries out a good action, but has an evil intention or does it for an evil purpose, it is not a moral action because the person's intention for doing it was evil in the first place.
- ▶ For example, consider a man had an affair with another man's wife. The man having the affair decides to apologize to the other man for having the affair. He makes such an apology in hopes that the husband will ultimately leave his wife, and the wife will decide to stay with the man who had the affair with her. The act itself (apologizing and asking for forgiveness) could be classified as a moral action, a good thing. However, it is an immoral action for two reasons. First, the man's intention is to break up the marriage; his intention is evil. Second, the consequences would also result in an evil thing; it would break up a marriage and family. Thus, two out of the three elements that constitute a moral action are evil in and of themselves even though the action itself could be a good thing, forgiveness and apology.
- ▶ The Church also insists that we can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good (USCCA, 312). The end does not justify the means. A person may not rob a bank to give money to the poor; the act itself is evil act even if the intention was good.

Catechist invites participants to summarize what they have heard thus far and to invite them to dialogue about their understanding and/or acceptance of the principles.

- ▶ Let's review what we just heard.
- ▶ If every moral action has three parts, what are those three parts?
- ▶ What are the implications of being aware of those three elements?

Catechist elicits answers such as: it invites us to discern our actions—what we do, why we do it, and what the consequences would be. It provides us a guide to help strengthen our conscience.

Catechist invites the group to give other examples of moral or immoral actions.

- ▶ Can you think of another example in which a person could carry out an action that is not evil in and of itself, but that it is done for an evil purpose—thus making it an evil action?
- ▶ How do you feel about these principles?
- ▶ What is the inherent wisdom in these criteria to assist people in making a moral choice?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ When we hear the word “morality,” people usually have a narrowly defined understanding of the term. They usually think in terms of sexual ethics.
- ▶ In what way is the Church's understanding of morality broader than a set of sexual ethics?
- ▶ Think back to the beginning of this discussion of Christian morality when you finished the statement: “Morality is....” In light of the teaching just presented, how would you now finish that statement? Is there anything you would like to add to your original statement?
- ▶ Is there anything in the Church's teaching about Christian morality that challenges you? Troubles you? Affirms you?



Community Connections

Implications

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

- ▶ What are the implications of this teaching for you as an individual and for us as a Church community?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question with one other person.

- ▶ Can you relate what we have shared today in the liturgy, in our breaking open session, and in our session on Church teaching to some experience in your life?
 - ▶ How does this teaching concretely have anything to do with your life?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

- ▶ Are there any behaviors that we take for granted that might be called into question in light of our teaching on Christian morality (exceeding speed limits, cheating in the market place, and so forth)?
- ▶ How do today's liturgy and our sharing on morality challenge you to be a better disciple? What might be a response?

Liturgy, Scripture, and doctrine challenges us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world.

Discuss what, if any, activity is taking place in the parish this week that flows from the Church's teaching regarding Christian morality.



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions, Doxology ("Glory be to the Father..."), a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA #90-97.

Option 2: Intercessions, Doxology, Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions, Roman Missal. Opening Prayer #30. Those Unjustly deprived of Liberty.

Appendix

#1. Fundamentalism insists that if something is in the Bible, it is the literally transmitted word of God. However, that literalism does not always apply across the board. It is interesting to note that fundamentalism often dismisses the biblical directive to sell all you have and give to the poor with the response that the Bible did not really mean that in the first place. One could ask, “Why is the command to sell all you have not taken literally, and why is the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist not taken literally, when your tradition insists that everything in the Bible is the inerrant word of God?”

The truth is that fundamentalism interprets the Bible just as Catholicism interprets the Bible. What we celebrate is the teaching authority of a tradition with a 2,000 year track record, the discerning power of the entire Church. This is why we say that we are saved by Scripture and Tradition—both Scripture and the Church are needed to help us live the moral life.

2. As a Christian, my choice to obey the civil law regarding the speed limit brings my Christian perspective into the choice. On a very practical level, I do not disobey the civil law against speeding because I do not want to get a ticket. On a moral level, however, my choice to obey the law is illumined by my relationship with Christ. I am in covenant relationship with Jesus. Jesus loves me unconditionally. I, in turn, love Jesus and wish to act according to his design.

We are all God’s children and are graced by God. As a child of God, I have a responsibility to care for those around me. If I choose to place anyone in danger because of my actions, my relationships are not in right order. My relationship with Christ is strained because I have violated the law of love—care and concern for one another. My relationship with my neighbor has been strained because I have placed them in harm’s way.

My relationship to myself is strained because in order to live in peace, my life has to be ordered to the will of God. As I reflect upon the life of Jesus in the gospel, I am invited into relationship. That relationship demands a response. The response made in love helps give meaning to my life.

#3. A woman shared how she treated someone very badly. She saw one of her children talking to one of his friends in the same way she treated that person. Her bad behavior made an impression on her child. Her personal sin was not personal. It impacted others, her child and the person he treated badly.

Handout on Christian Morality

Roots in Scripture

- ▶ Morality refers to behaviors that flow from an individual's principled assumptions.
- ▶ Both the Old Testament and the New Testament understood every part of life, both the secular and the spiritual, as one complete whole.
- ▶ Philosophy of the ancient Greek world, on the other hand, divided the spiritual and secular into separate parts. That division is called dualism.
- ▶ The Scriptures do not support dualism.
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- ▶ The Old Testament understanding of wholeness is the right ordering of relationships, relationship to God, to one another, to the earth, and to oneself.
- ▶ The roots of Catholic morality are based primarily on the fundamental biblical themes of creation, exodus, covenant, and cross.

Creation

The biblical theme of creation reminds us that God constantly seeks to recreate us in his image; he is always inviting new life; he always asks that we be good stewards of what he has given us—that we take care of one another, the poor, and the earth.

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The biblical theme of exodus reminds us that God constantly invites us to turn away from all that enslaves us—all that keeps us in bondage (such as addictions of all forms)—and to allow God to lead us to freedom and new life.

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The biblical theme of covenant reminds us that we are in a covenant relationship with God. God entered into a binding relationship with human beings. He promised that he would take care of us and in response to his providential care; we would love the Lord God, one another, and those who could not take care of themselves.

Cross

The biblical theme of the cross reminds us that, like Jesus, we are invited to take up our cross and lay down our lives for others—for those who suffer.

The Beatitudes

Just actions rooted in the Beatitudes

- ▶ The Christian Scriptures speak of moral behavior in terms of just actions such as feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty.
- ▶ Jesus affirmed the importance of the Ten Commandments, but he took them a step further.
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- ▶ Thus, it is just as important to be attentive to issues that protect the unborn as well as issues that deal with the less advantaged, to be in solidarity with all who suffer and are oppressed, not just in our own backyard, but around the world.
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- ▶ Very early in our Church history, one's morality was judged in light of their discipleship. For example, before one was admitted for baptism, their readiness was discerned. (Catechumens preparing for baptism will discern their readiness before they are fully initiated.)
- ▶ The criteria for this discernment were based on the extent of the person's moral behavior. Was conversion visible in the person's life? Was there a change, a turn from one way of living to a new way of living in Christ? For example, was there evidence in the person's life that such conversion had taken place? Did this person reach out to the poor and disadvantaged? Did this person have a willingness and

an enthusiasm for sharing the good news of Jesus? Did this person living according to gospel values? Did this person pray and nurture his or her relationship with God? These are questions that we must ask ourselves throughout our lives.

Other Foundations: Communal Nature of Morality

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- ▶ Human beings possess dignity. God is present to us in all of life, thus all of life is graced by God.
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 - We are in community through our union with God, who himself is communal by nature. God is Father, God is Son, and God is Spirit. We are social beings.
 - We are intended to live in relationship.
 - As human beings, we live in the community of family, Church, and world. We are destined for happiness insofar as we live in right relationship with one another.
 - When we respond in love to uphold the dignity of the human person, we become fully human and fully alive.

The moral life is communal

- ▶ Our moral life is communal.
- ▶ Even our personal sins impact others in some way. (Refer to Appendix for a related story.)
- ▶ Our pursuit of happiness must be grounded in care and concern for others.
- ▶ Living a moral life demands that we uphold the ethical teaching of Christ in the gospel.
- ▶ God created us with a free will. We have the power to choose the path for our lives. We are free to pattern our lives in conformity to God's will, to say yes or no to God. Human beings are free to choose between good and evil, thus we are called to responsibility.
- ▶ As mature persons of faith we are called to behave in a moral way because God desires it. However, we are given the freedom to act morally or not.

Sin can weaken our capacity to act morally

- ▶ We can grow in freedom by performing moral actions, by developing good habits.
- ▶ Sin dulls our ability to act morally. Thus, living a life of virtue is important if one

wants to live a moral life.

- ▶ Such virtuous living strengthens our ability to live morally.

Moral acts

- ▶ In order to understand Catholic morality, we must understand the essence of what constitutes a moral act. Every moral action has three parts:
 - what we do—the act
 - the intention—why we do the act
 - the actual situation of the act such as where and when it takes place, how the act is carried out, with whom it is carried out, and the consequences of the act.
- ▶ An act is moral if the act is by itself a good thing to do, a good action.
- ▶ Some things are, by nature, intrinsically bad, and thus, the act itself is not a moral act (such as murder, rape, or torture). The reason for doing such acts makes no difference. The act in and of itself is always immoral.
- ▶ An action is morally good if the action itself is a good action and if the person doing the act has a good intention.
- ▶ If the person carries out a good action, but has an evil intention or does it for an evil purpose, it is not a moral action because the person's intention for doing it was evil in the first place.
- ▶ For example, consider a man had an affair with another man's wife. The man having the affair decides to apologize to the other man for having the affair. He makes such an apology in hopes that the husband will ultimately leave his wife, and the wife will decide to stay with the man who had the affair with her. The act itself (apologizing and asking for forgiveness) could be classified as a moral action, a good thing. However, it is an immoral action for two reasons. First, the man's intention is to break up the marriage; his intention is evil. Second, the consequences would also result in an evil thing; it would break up a marriage and family. Thus, two out of the three elements that constitute a moral action are evil in and of themselves even though the action itself could be a good thing, forgiveness and apology.
- ▶ The Church also insists that we can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good (USCCA, 312). The end does not justify the means. A person may not rob a bank to give money to the poor; the act itself is evil act even if the intention was good.